

## **Belltown**

### **PROFILE**

The Belltown Urban Center Village is bounded by Denny Way, Fifth and Sixth Avenues, Stewart Street, First Avenue and Elliott Avenue, and the waterfront (see the map on the next page). It is part of the Downtown Urban Center. Uptown/Lower Queen Anne borders Belltown to the north, Denny Triangle to the east, and the Downtown Commercial Core to the south.

The neighborhood now called Belltown was once the location of the steep Denny Hill. Between 1889 and 1911, the hill was washed away, flattened to become the level Denny Regrade, with the expectation that downtown commercial development would expand to the north. Such expansion didn't happen and for decades Belltown sat as a mixture of small warehouses and manufacturing plants, other small businesses, spaces for artists, and housing for people with little money.

That changed in the 1990s. As a result of the regrade, Belltown had become a generally flat plain on top of a steep bluff sitting above Elliott Bay. In the 1990s, developers took advantage of the impressive views this terrain provided and Belltown saw more growth in that decade than any other area in the city. It now boasts many highrise, high-end residential buildings, a number of very high-density apartment buildings with more moderate rents, and a sizable collection of historic apartment buildings and hotels, many of which have been preserved for low-income housing use through partnerships between the city and low-income housing providers.

It is home to the Art Institute of Seattle, Real Networks, and KIRO TV, along with a wide range of restaurants, bars and retail stores, generally serving the higher-income residents of the neighborhood, and a number of social service providers serving the homeless and other very poor residents of the neighborhood. Residents may walk to work at Real Networks an internet media company, or to the Millionaire Club hoping to find work as a day laborer.

Between 1990 and 2000, 4,400 additional people made their home in Belltown and between 1995 and 2001, 5,700 more people were employed in the neighborhood. With an area of 220 acres, the neighborhood is the third densest residential neighborhood in the city (after Capitol and First Hills), and the third densest employment area (after the Commercial Core and Denny Triangle).

### **THE NEIGHBORHOOD PLAN**

Like 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Belltown had a previous neighborhood plan focused on transportation and land use, but also extending to open space. The *Denny Regrade Development Plan* (1974) resulted in mixed-use zoning for much of the area in 1974.

Some residential development followed, but along with those scattered residential buildings, new office towers were built in the neighborhood.



In 1985, a new Downtown Plan enlarged Belltown's area of mixed-use zoning and further strengthened residential zoning. Commercial uses were significantly restricted. The Downtown Plan also established a "Belltown Target Area" for investment in low-income housing preservation and development, street and sidewalk improvements along 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenues, and a design competition to stimulate interest in developing in Belltown. Developers have reported that after the zoning changes, land prices stagnated or even fell in the neighborhood. As a result of the changes and falling property values, it has been said that property owners who had been speculating on the potential for future office towers to be built on their property reconsidered how they were going to use their property and made it available at lower prices to residential developers.

During the same period, the City invested a significant amount of money to preserve existing buildings in the neighborhood for low-income use. The 1986 Seattle housing levy focused on funding the preservation of existing low-income housing in Downtown, with much of that money going to projects in Belltown. Additional funding sources, such as the housing bonus and TDR programs, were focused on preservation of existing low-income housing in Belltown. As a result, many older privately-owned apartment buildings were acquired by non-profit housing providers and preserved for low-income use. These new owners renovated the buildings they acquired, resulting in an improved streetscape that proved more attractive to for-profit housing developers. Today, there are over 2,000 subsidized rental-housing units in thirty-one Belltown apartment buildings. These buildings help to maintain some of the diversity in building scale, housing type and household composition that remain in the neighborhood.

Belltown started to "take off" in the early 1990s. Four factors contributed heavily to the change. First, the 1985 rezones promoted higher-density residential development. Second, federal tax laws adopted in the late 1980s allowed Real Estate Investment Trusts (REIT) which raised very cheap capital for financing (3-4%, as opposed to the 7-8% offered by traditional lenders). Third, the "Urban Renaissance" market hit Seattle, meaning that recent college graduates, childless couples, and empty nesters began to find city neighborhoods attractive again. In Belltown, this began with a few small projects, such as artists' co-ops and City-subsidized housing, and then larger projects followed when lenders began to see less risk in inner-city ventures. Fourth, the City's Building Code was amended to allow cheaper construction techniques in higher density residential buildings, such as those permitted in Belltown. As a result a number of projects with wood-frame construction over a concrete base have been built.

Responding to some of these forces, the 1998 neighborhood plan identified the key facet of the neighborhood as its diversity. The plan called for the enhancement of that diversity along with expanded connections to neighboring communities. The plan identified three key strategies that needed to be achieved to maintain the vision of a diverse and accessible community.

The first of those strategies was to create more green space in the community through the development of "green streets" and to provide better connections to open space outside the village. Specific activities that the community planned for include:

- Preservation and expansion of the Belltown P-patch;

- Providing more green space in the neighborhood through the designation and development of green streets; and
- Improved connections to the waterfront and Seattle Center.

The second strategy sought to ensure that as it grows, Belltown develops as a “mixed-use, mixed-income eclectic community that provides a broad range of services required for a healthy and vital downtown residential community.” This strategy brought together a broad range of steps to aid in meeting this community vision, including:

- Development of a Belltown Neighborhood Center, a neighborhood school and a major grocery store;
- Increased community involvement in public safety and affordable housing activities;
- Improvements to the streetscape, including improved lighting, expanding street level retail uses, and allowing the development of spaces where residents can both live and work;
- Protection of historic and neighborhood icon buildings; and
- Development of a multi-modal transportation hub.

The final strategy identified by the neighborhood was to ensure that the supply of parking is maintained at a level that is adequate to serve neighborhood residents, businesses and employers. This strategy focused on a number of activities to increase both on-street and off-street parking.

## GROWTH

Belltown has ambitious growth targets of 6,500 additional housing units and 4,500 new jobs for the period between 1994 and 2014. Between 1995 and 2002, it surpassed the latter and was well on its way toward achieving the former. Belltown’s growth is the strongest of any neighborhood in Seattle.

Belltown is a spectacular example of the so-called urban renaissance of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has been enormously popular with singles and childless couples who want to live in the middle of city life and can afford luxury apartments or condominiums. However, the neighborhood also saw a very large increase in the number of people not living in traditional apartments or condominiums. The “group quarters population” grew by over 500 percent between 1990 and 2000, from 140 people in 1990 to 865 in 2000. Even as the neighborhood saw significant growth in apartments and condominiums, it also saw

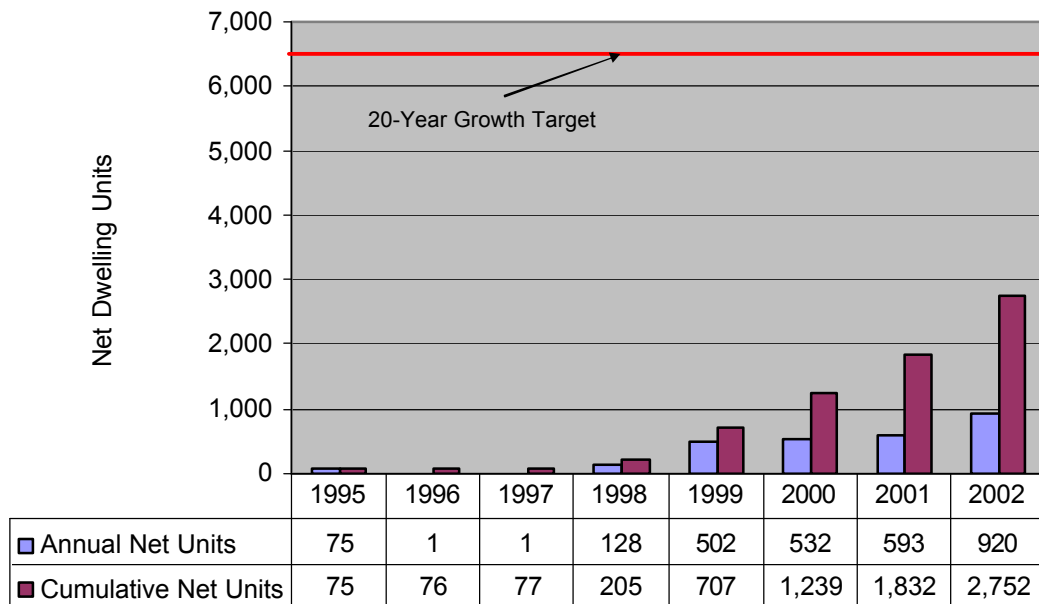
significant growth in people who did not have a traditional home. Overall,

Population	Belltown	Downtown Urban Center	All Urban Villages	City of Seattle
1990	4,116	12,193	150,629	516,259
2000	8,504	20,088	178,204	563,374
% Change	107%	65%	18%	9%

Belltown's population more than doubled in the 1990s (4,388 new residents), compared to 18% growth across all urban villages.

The net number of new dwelling units added from 1995 through 2002, was 2,752, which amounts to 42% of the 20-year growth target and 15% of all new units in Seattle. Another 248 new units had building permits approved at the end of 2002.

### Belltown Urban Center Village Net Housing Growth



Employment growth has been even more vigorous. Between 1995 and 2001, 5,670 new jobs have come to Belltown, a 32% increase and 126% of the 20-year employment growth target. Belltown was the only Downtown neighborhood to see employment growth between 2000 and 2001, at the start of the recession. The biggest changes in employment were in business services (including high tech) and social services jobs. The biggest losses were in transportation services (travel agencies and shipping firms).

	Belltown	Downtown Urban Center	All Urban Villages	City of Seattle
Employment				
1995	17,539	140,334	364,204	427,877
2000	21,161	174,528	437,052	511,229
2001	23,209	168,830	428,942	502,515
% Change	32%	20%	18%	17%

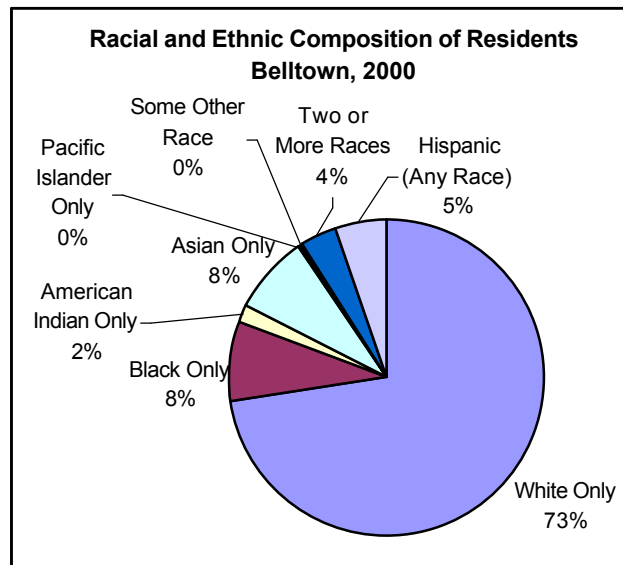
### DIVERSITY

While Belltown's demographics may exemplify the successful creation of an in-city neighborhood and a home for "empty nesters" and affluent tech workers, Belltown has

remained a community where large numbers of poorer households are still able to find housing.

Belltown currently accommodates a very broad range of incomes. In 1999, Belltown had higher percentages of both households earning over \$200,000 and households earning under \$30,000 than the city as a whole. Overall, there is a wider range of household incomes in 1999 than there were in 1989, when over a third of households earned less than \$10,000 (\$14,500 in 1999 dollars.)

More people of color are living in Belltown since 1990, according to the Census, but the urban village still has a larger percentage of white residents than the city as a whole. The number of people of color in Belltown more than tripled, increasing their share from 17% to 27% of the residents. In spite of this growth, the village still has a lower proportion of people of color than the overall city proportion, which increased to 32% in 2000. The largest percentage change in Belltown was among the Asian population, which increased from 4% in 1990 to 8% in 2000.

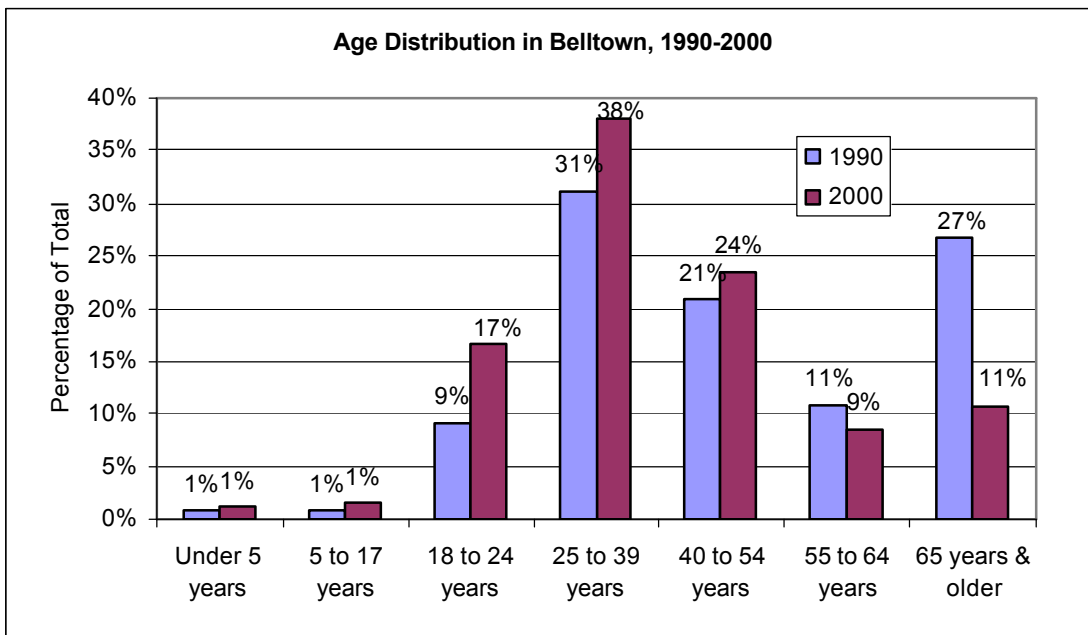


There is far less diversification of household types in Belltown than in the city as a whole. Belltown is dominated by working-age singles and childless couples. Between 1990 and 2000, a quarter of the households with seniors left the village. Only 3% of Belltown's households have children, compared to the citywide figure of 20%. The village's percentage of one-person households (75%) is much higher than elsewhere, though the share of households that contained only one person dropped between 1990 and 2000.

	1990		2000		% Change 1990-2000
	#	% of Total	#	% of Total	
Households	3,220	100%	5,871	100%	82%
with children	48	1%	160	3%	233%
with seniors	1,004	31%	744	13%	-26%
Family Households	408	13%	866	15%	112%
One-Person Households	2,569	80%	4,379	75%	70%
People in Group Quarters	139		865		522%
Average Household Size	1.24		1.30		5%



Naturally, age diversity has a similar pattern. Belltown has a much smaller percentage of children, and roughly the same proportion of seniors (11%) as found in the rest of the city and urban villages. Today, Belltown is higher in the 25-54 age bracket, 62% to the city's 54% and urban villages' 53%. Forty-five percent (45%) of the village's growth came in the 25-39 age group and 32% of growth was in the 40-64 range. The population over 65 dropped by 200 residents as all other age groups increased. If developers are correct and a large number of baby boomers have bought condominiums in Belltown, the percentage of older residents may rise again in the next Census.x



Belltown's recent development appeals to particular household types: small households, either early in their career or empty-nesters who have seen their children grow up. The units being built have few bedrooms and do not easily accommodate larger families. Only 20% of units in the neighborhood have more than one bedroom according to the last census, and are generally not designed with amenities that would appeal to families with children.

### **VIBRANT, PEDESTRIAN-ORIENTED COMMERCIAL AREAS**

Belltown has become one of the most exciting commercial areas in the city. While Belltown's revitalization began in the 1980s, pedestrian activity from shopping, dining, and entertainment increased markedly in the 1990s. The landscape is very pedestrian-oriented, with wide sidewalks, small blocks, and many street trees (approximately 1,069, or 111 for every linear street mile), many planted in response to the 1985 plan. There are plenty of buildings that keep the streetscape interesting. The generally flat terrain makes walking through the neighborhood easy.

The community is home to a wide range of restaurants, clubs and retail stores. A visitor to Belltown can purchase flowers, clothing, furniture and pet food, consume African food and Jazz, rent videos or go dancing. However, Belltown lacks the full range of retail

goods and services that might be associated with a “complete” neighborhood. Notably, the neighborhood has long hoped for a full grocery store.

Many of the retail spaces in the neighborhood have been created as a result of requirements imposed on new buildings along certain streets. There is an ongoing debate about requiring street-level retail on more streets of Belltown (retail is optional on most blocks). Some believe there are already too many commercial vacancies, and rents required to offset the costs of construction would be too high for retail tenants to pay, creating more vacancies. Others say this is merely a remnant of the current recession that will disappear when the economy rebounds. In 2001, 14% of Belltown jobs were in retail.

One type of street level use that has attracted debate is the so-called live/work building. The community wants to support spaces where artists can live, and create and sell their art. However, the live-work spaces that have been built don’t work as envisioned. These were meant to attract people who wanted to keep their workplaces at home and invite some customer traffic to street-level offices or shops. Few units function in the intended way. Instead, most people living in these units work elsewhere, leaving the street-level spaces “dead” during the day, thereby interrupting the continuity of the streetscape and commercial areas. DCLU is working with the neighborhood to revise the requirements for these street-level live-work uses to ensure that they work as both commercial and residential spaces.

Residential density, mixed land uses, proximity to the Downtown Core, and the active lifestyles of young adults and other urbanites, have created a strong market for nightlife and led to evening pedestrian traffic, drawing more people to want to live there. This helped the neighborhood to grow into the vibrant community that exists today despite a perception of safety risks.

## CRIME

Crime in Belltown is high but is slowly declining. Incidences of crime in Belltown numbered 2,028 in 2001, down from 3,128 in 1996, with improvement each year in between. Furthermore, Belltown crimes, 5.6% of the city’s total in 1996, were reduced to 3.9% of citywide crimes in 2001. On a per capita basis Belltown was safer in 2001 than the Downtown core to the south or the Uptown neighborhood to the north. In spite of a string of high-profile street crimes



Seattle Police Bike Officers assigned to Belltown under a new Belltown banner.  
Source: Belltown.org



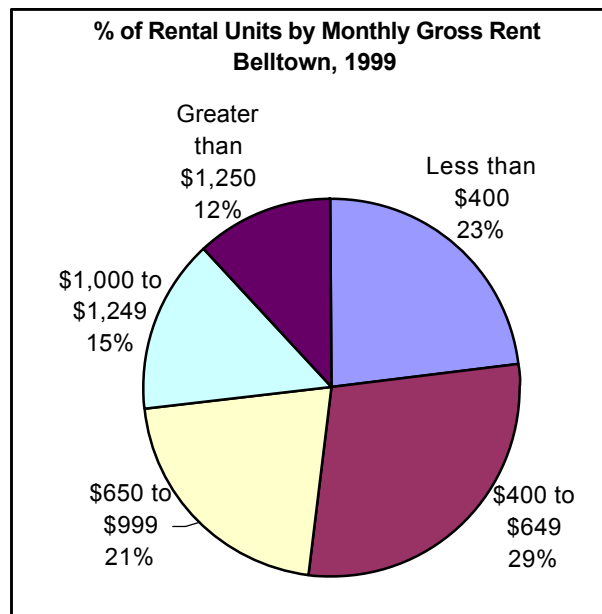
in 2000, according to the citywide residential survey in 2001, Downtown is perceived to be safer than it was in 1996.

Surely, the booming economy in the late 1990s had a positive impact on reducing crime; but the community and city have also made efforts. The community has been working with the City to address long-standing crime issues. For example, in response to the neighborhood plan, Seattle City Light has installed new lights in the neighborhood to enhance safety. Neighbors of Tillicum Place, a small park in the northeast corner of the neighborhood, have been working with the City to install additional lighting, seating, paving and landscape improvements to the park to enhance usability and safety. In response to a meeting with Mayor Nickels, the police presence in the neighborhood has been enhanced with additional bicycle cops. Finally, Parks and Recreation and City Light made improvements to Regrade Park, a center of criminal activity.

### **A VARIETY OF HOUSING TYPES BUILT TO APPROPRIATE SCALE**

Belltown is a high-density residential neighborhood. As such, the range of housing types is limited, and skewed to small units in large buildings. A number of lower-scale buildings from the 1920s and earlier have been preserved for low-income housing use and provide a visual break from the new larger apartment buildings. These buildings help to maintain a range of rents in the neighborhood. The City currently subsidizes 2,000 housing units for low-income households in the neighborhood, approximately 30% of all units in the village.

The number of high-end market-rate units has been growing faster than the number of subsidized and affordable market-



Belltown Court is one of many new buildings built in Belltown in the last eight years that contain ground floor retail space and apartments or condominiums.

rate units. Developers say they have built housing types to meet demand. With expensive land, and perceived demand for expensive units, developers have sought to maximize their profits by building high-end units. In 2001 and 2002, as over a thousand new market-rate units came on the market, demand for those units has dropped and rents in Belltown followed. The vacancy rate in Belltown in the fall of 2000 was 2.5%, but by the fall of 2002, the vacancy rate was 10%. Average rents in new construction fell 4% during the same period. In spite of these drops, average rents in Belltown remain higher than rents in other parts of the city.

If, after the real estate market recovers, developers continue to build primarily for the high-end market, the neighborhood will become a neighborhood of singles or couples without children at both ends of the income scale. Some additional units for lower income residents will be built using housing funds. At least three subsidized buildings were under construction in Belltown in 2002 using a range of funds.

### **RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESIDENTIAL AND COMMERCIAL AREAS**

People living and working in Belltown expect businesses and residences to share space. Many new buildings in Belltown are mid-rise or high-rise mixed-use structures, creating something of a “vertical community.” Belltown residents often live in buildings with commercial uses at the ground floor; all residents live close to some commercial services.

Office, retail and institutional buildings are also interspersed among the residential buildings, allowing some residents to easily walk to work. Except for a couple of office towers built in the 1980s, most of these commercial buildings are well-integrated into the community.

### **COMMUNITY FACILITIES AND OPEN SPACE**

At the time the Belltown Neighborhood Plan was written the neighborhood had few community facilities. The closest library was the Central library, and the closest community center was at the top of Queen Anne Hill. There were a couple of small parks and a P-patch in the neighborhood, some of them notorious as drug markets, and large



Entrance to the Belltown P-patch.

open spaces, including Seattle Center and Myrtle Edwards park were at the neighborhood's edges.

The Belltown plan and its implementation are starting to result in additional community facilities available to this fast-growing neighborhood.

In 1993, community members had come together to lobby for and develop a P-patch at the corner of Vine Street and Elliott Avenue. As

the Belltown neighborhood plan was being adopted, and in response to community lobbying, the City acquired property next to the P-patch site. This property included three cottages dating from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which are among the last remnants of a pre-regrade Belltown. Cottage Park will provide the neighborhood with an active open space in the sun. The cottages will provide meeting and educational rooms. They will also house two writers-in-residence who will assist with security at the P-patch and the operation of the community center.

Adjacent to the P-Patch, the community has worked for a number of years to improve Vine Street. This project, called “Growing Vine Street,” is one of the City’s first concerted efforts to create a Green Street Downtown.

Breathing room and usable open space were two of the goals of the green streets program, a City program intended to obtain developer participation in re-landscaping certain streets to create a pedestrian-friendly environment. Although attempts to create green streets have been made a number of times, the program has faltered because of the difficulty of designing a street that meets the goals of providing both open space and access for cars. This has made developers reluctant to put effort or expense into designing Green Streets. A number of residential projects have been built along Vine Street since the Growing Vine Street program started. Few have been able to incorporate Growing Vine Street features into their projects.

The Department of Parks and Recreation, as a result of the neighborhood plan’s call for a new community center, included Belltown as one of three neighborhoods to receive a new community center. The Parks Department is currently working with LIHI, a low-income housing provider, to build a new mixed-use community-center/subsidized housing project at First and Battery.

The proposed Olympic Sculpture Park, a privately-funded project of the Seattle Art Museum, will contribute 8.5 acres of breathing room and usable open space to Belltown. Land has been acquired, and the park is scheduled to open in 2004.

Open space is often hard to come by in the downtown areas of big cities settled in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but Seattle is considered to be particularly deficient in this aspect. Some of the City’s tools for generating public open space from new commercial development do not apply in Belltown, a residential neighborhood. Other tools, such as transferring development rights off of new open spaces, were recently permitted as a result of the Downtown neighborhood plans, but have not yet had an opportunity to function.

## **PARTNERSHIPS FOR SERVICES, ACTIVITIES, AND INTERACTION**

The Belltown Community Council and the Belltown Business Association, are both active organizations with many participants and multiple activities underway. They have inherited a legacy of community activism stretching back at least into the 1970s. Eight Neighborhood Matching Fund projects, raising over \$270,000, attest to the community’s ability to work together to accomplish small-scale objectives. One of those projects helped the Crime Prevention Council increase its membership. The community has worked diligently to develop the Belltown P-Patch, one of the largest projects, which has 30 plots. In addition, a new community website Belltown.org was developed by the Belltown Business Association to advertise important information about the community.

## **COMMUNITY IDENTITY**

The Belltown neighborhood planning process renamed the Denny Regrade, Belltown. A promotional campaign by the Belltown Business Association carried this out, and the name stuck. It is found in banners recently placed throughout the neighborhood and in most media reports about the neighborhood. People agree that the name successfully associates the neighborhood with the image of a vibrant, growing Belltown.

One aspect of the neighborhood's identity that community groups work to hold on to is that of Belltown as a community of artists. In the 1980s and early 1990s, artists were a large presence in the neighborhood. As the neighborhood began to be developed, partly as a result of the attention brought to the neighborhood by resident artists, they started to be priced out of the neighborhood. Artist live/work spaces have been redeveloped or renovated into apartment buildings or condominiums targeted at higher income residents. There have been some recent experiments that may provide new opportunities for the arts to thrive in the neighborhood. Vacant retail spaces in buildings that were planned to be demolished have been leased to arts-oriented businesses as a lively temporary use for those spaces. Some of the businesses that got their start in those spaces have moved to more permanent locations.

## **MOBILITY**

Connections and circulation do not get much better in Seattle than in Belltown. Belltown benefits from the small-block grid that was laid in the 19<sup>th</sup> century before the regrade. The small blocks and flat terrain facilitate walking and Second Avenue provides a southbound bike lane between Queen Anne and the Downtown Core. Bus service is frequent on several streets, although one must transfer downtown to reach Capitol Hill or the University District. Approximately half of the neighborhood is in the Metro Ride-Free zone, which means that residents, employees and shoppers can ride a bus through a large part of the neighborhood or into the downtown core without paying. Belltown will also be on the Monorail's Green Line, providing new transit connections to Ballard and to West Seattle.

## **SUMMARY**

Belltown has passed its 20-year jobs target and achieved 42% of its housing target. Although racial and ethnic diversity increased in the 1990s, and the neighborhood retains a large amount of housing affordable to very-low-income households, much of the growth was fueled by upper-income white singles and childless couples, led by people in their twenties and thirties. The economic nature of Belltown has changed dramatically. It now boasts popular restaurants, clubs, ample pedestrian activity, and property values that are nearly as high as in the commercial core. The crime rate in the neighborhood, while still high, has been dropping and perceptions of safety are improving. A new community center is planned and along with Cottage Park will provide new neighborhood gathering places. The Olympic Sculpture Park project will provide a significant new open space. Neighborhood stewardship is strong, and among other successes, deserves credit for promoting a positive new image for Belltown.